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Staying Close While Living Apart

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Staying Close While Living Apart

By LaRae H. Lemich

We did not plan to live apart when we relocated 13 years ago. Yet, after just four short years of partial retirement, that is exactly what happened. The business needed my husband; the kids needed me. Just like that, we were a long-distance couple, one of an estimated 3 million¹ U.S. couples as it turns out, also known as living apart together.

How would we remain close in our marriage while living in different states? How would my husband handle the long commute? Would this arrangement affect our teenage kids? These and other questions rumbled around in my mind as I considered the implications. The last thing I wanted was for apathy or,

worse, entropy to enter our relationship, causing us to slowly drift apart. I knew we needed a plan.

I would like to say that we prayed and counseled together about it then miraculously came up with a foolproof plan, but that would be untrue. Our plan has been a work in process, much like a blueprint for a home: the basic floorplan is clear, but the details do not emerge until the building is in progress. However, we began our adventure with a few basics.

When We're Apart

Every morning, we send each other an intimate, fun-loving text. It is such a simple way to tenderly connect first thing in the morning—a gentle reminder

that we are thinking of the other. It may be just as simple as “loves and kisses” with all the appropriate—or inappropriate—emojis. An article in Patheos listed five ways to improve your marriage using your smart phone.² The first tactic was to flirt with your spouse via text. We have never missed a morning.

Although we have both become adept at solving our own problems, occasionally something comes up during the day that needs both of our input. Knowing that the other is just a phone call away is comforting. These “taking care of business” calls have varied over the years; most have been simple, but some have been more difficult. Yes, we face some challenging times now and then; most marriages do. So, we try to stay right on



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top of our concerns before they can spiral out of control.

We solve the little problems as they arise, staying focused on the issues at hand. Psychology Today reported: the secret sauce that sets happy couples apart is taking a solution-oriented approach to conflicts.³ As we

focus on more solvable problems first, we build the tools we need to tackle the harder problems later. Thereby, we avoid any animosity or contention which would be especially damaging in a long-distance relationship.

We enjoy our evening phone call, scheduled at the same time every night. This is when we catch up. We share the events of the day, listening and empa-

“Connecting emotionally is one strategy that makes our long-distance relationship work.”

thizing with each other. Our call time is sacred and vital to our emotional connection. In truth, connecting emotionally is one strategy that makes our long-distance relationship work.⁴ We have discovered that strengthening our emotional connection includes owning our emotions, being responsible for how we feel, and not putting all our needs on our partner.

Sometimes we discuss religious topics—sharing scriptures, thoughts, or doctrines about the Savior. The Family: A Proclamation to the World teaches that “Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵ We recognize that to feel that happiness, we need spiritual help as we work through this long-distance challenge. So, we always end our call kneeling together in prayer.

When We're Together

When the weekend comes, my husband makes the 5-hour commute home. I try to have a home-cooked meal ready knowing that he has most likely been living on frozen meals and fast food all week. Since we have been doing this for so long, we affectionately call the weekends our “conjugal visit.” We really try to focus on each other during our together time.

As important as our weekly tasks and responsibilities are, the time we have together is essential, and made sweeter due to the separation. So, we make the most of that time in a variety of ways: we dine together, at home or out; we work together on the yard or house; we exercise together, taking walks or going to the gym. We also tease, laugh, and play. Undoubtedly, our favorite activity is just relaxing on the sofa, watching movies or sports together—our happy place.

The Pew Research Center posed the question, “What makes life meaningful?”⁶ The answers were clear and consistent: family makes life meaningful. In fact, most Americans report that they find a great deal of meaning in spending time with family. Family

relationships, which include couple relationships, can enrich and enlarge us. As we show gratitude for each other and are careful not to let our relationships become casual, we can discover rich meaning and purpose, no matter the distance.

Having a plan was crucial for us to successfully navigate through our long-distance relationship. I once read that creating a strong shared vision not only increases our emotional connection, but enhances attraction for one another.⁷ That is the goal—stay emotionally connected and attracted to each other—even if we must do it from a distance. Come to think of it, all couples could benefit from this, regardless of their residential circumstances.

We do not plan on this arrangement lasting forever. Changes might be happening in the very near future. But, until then, we will keep sharing our vision, connecting emotionally, and finding meaning together. The warmth and closeness that we have always felt in our marriage does not need to change just because we are living apart.

Endnotes

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